CIA Data Say Israel by '74 Secretly Obtained A-Matter

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The Central Intelligence Agency concluded as early as September, 1974, that Israel had acquired "large quantities of uranium" for its nuclear weapons program "partly by clandestine means."

The statement, contained in an official CIA report classified "secret," is the first documented assertion by U.S. officials that the Israelis secretly diverted nuclear weapons materials for their own use.

The report was just released to the Natural Resources Defense Council following a Freedom of Information Act request.

It also contains an estimate of "a strong chance that Japan's leaders will conclude they must have nuclear weapons" in the early 1980s.

The CIA was apparently nervous about the report's release. On Thursday, Gene Wilson, a CIA information official, telephoned S. Jacob Scherr of the NRDC to say that there had been an "error" in releasing parts of the report, and that parts of the document could cause "an international incident," according to Scherr.

The report, which seems to have had the concurrence of the Director of Central Intelligence and other high ranking intelligence officials, said of the Israeli nuclear weapon capability:

"We believe that Israel already has produced nuclear weapons."

But the intelligence estimate adds that CIA does not expect the Israelis "to provide confirmation of widespread suspicions of their capability, either by nuclear testing or by threats of use, short of a grave threat to the nation's existence."

There have been several allegations of Israel's involvement in diverting nuclear materials. One suspected incident, according to reliable sources, occurred in 1968, when a German ship carrying 200 tons of "yellowcake," or natural uranium, and bound for Italy disappeared for several days. The ship was later found without its cargo.

In May, 1977, after the story of the cargo's disappearance surfaced, Euratom, the European atomic energy agency, confirmed that the uranium had disappeared.

A second set of allegations concerning possible Israeli diversion of nuclear materials concerns the disappearance of large quantities of high-grade enriched uranium over a period of years in the 1960s from the Nuclear Equipment and Materials Corp. in Apollo, Pa.

The newly released CIA report is the second public confirmation by CIA of its private assessment that Israel is in possession of nuclear weapons. In 1976, The Washington Post reported that a "high official" of CIA stated that Israel has 10 to 20 nuclear weapons "ready and available for use." The official was later identified as Carl Duckett, then CIA's deputy director for science and technology.

The report reveals a split among high-ranking intelligence officials regarding Japan. The director of central intelligence and some other officials "believe" that Japan would not embark a program of nuclear weapons development "in the abscene of a major adverse shif in great power relationships."

But the assistant chief of staff for intelligence of both the Navy and the Air Force disagreed with this assessment. They "see a strong chance that Japan's leaders will conclude that they must have nuclear weapons if they are to achieve their national objectives in the develping Asian power balance," the report says.

The report discusses the likelihood that other nations, including India, Argentina, South Africa, Taiwan and Japan, will develop nuclear weapons. Some portions of the report, apparently discussing India, were deleted prior to the report's release. The NRDC sought the document in connection with its opposition to the shipment of low-grade enriched uranium fuel to India, which detonated a nuclear "device" in May 1974.

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